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The Enemy Renarrated: Beyond Culture Clash

Abstract: *National Geographic* magazine's visual and verbal representations of "exotic" or "Other" cultures have for more than a century formed people's opinions and knowledge around the world in relation to these people. This article is an attempt to prove that these representations can never be objective or "purified" from the ideological, social, cultural or historical context of the creator of the images and discourse. Through my analysis of *National Geographic's* visual representation of Iranian identity, I interrogate representation and the knowledge it produces and I show that the reading it makes of the world one among many possibilities available.

Keywords: identity, National Geographic, representation, images, ideology

Introduction

It cannot be denied that *National Geographic* (NG) during its 120 years of existence has become for its millions of readers a window to the world of "exotic" people and places through the representations it makes of the "Other". NG's mission has been to diffuse geographic knowledge by studying societies and to inspire people to care about the planet¹. *National Geographic Magazine*, which became *National Geographic* in 1960, is nowadays one of the world's largest nonprofit scientific and educational institutions. However, we believe that its construction of knowledge is infused with the prevailing western concepts the institution has adopted.

The present article sets out to investigate how writers, editors, photographers and designers of *National Geographic* select photographs and construct written text in order to produce representations of "Other" cultures. We try to gain a better understanding of the world and its dominant conceptual systems of thought and make a criticism of science and its apparent positivism. We acknowledge the complexity of much of what we try to understand and we seek to emphasize the interpretative nature of knowledge (Cilliers, 2005: 255). Representations of the Other always involve choice of frameworks and the creation of categories that reveal more about the conceptual world of the one making the representation than that of the Other.

In the case of *National Geographic*, it is essential to study the visual alongside the verbal mode of meaning-making since photographs cover an important part of the magazine. Images are a significant and powerful part of multimodal texts, because they transmit a sense of realism, which has a key aesthetic value for the readers. Moreover, the visual mode of meaning making is not, in our view, just a complement and enhancement of the verbal text, but it is a vital contributor to the way "Other" cultures are "imagined" by *National Geographic's* community of readers. We investigate how photographers use existing resources in order to represent reality in a particular way.

¹ <http://www.nationalgeographic.com/about/>

We develop a critical (Hoy, 1994: 105) reading of *National Geographic*. By critical reading we mean an approach to the different topics that help us understand better the verbal and visual construction the magazine makes of Other people. *National Geographic* is the *locus* or contact zone (Pratt, 1992: 4) where cultures meet. The representations the magazine makes of Other cultures measures them by using instruments that mediate between the culture of the represented and of the one making the representation. We analyze the product, the verbal and visual representations, but we do not lose sight of the processes used to make the representation.

Our hypothesis is that in the past it was Imperialism that created the lenses through which the explorer and scientist saw the "Other" (Pratt, 1992: 33-34). Nowadays, it is hegemony that structures the lenses (Holland and Huggan, 2000: viii). Based on this hypothesis, we hold that in the past the genre of travel writing hid its imperialistic intentions behind its apparent exploratory inclination. In the past as well as in the present, the majority of explorers come from the "supposed" centers of knowledge and are, thus, embedded in cultures that adopt a "purified", scientific and rational way to approach their object of research (Latour, 1993: 29). Their science is supposed to be objective, rational, neutral and not influenced by subjective and local trends of knowledge.

However, the place where we are located influences our perspective. And since these scientists are located in a hegemonic space they see things from a hegemonic perspective that cannot be purified from the ideology of the culture where they come from. We address the concept of visibility as the tool used by the magazine to prove the alleged objectivity of the stories it tells. Photography can be said to be the prototype of objective representation since reality is "depicted exactly as it is". However, we show that anthropological photography is hybrid since it happens in the "contact zone" (Pratt, 1992: 4). Therefore the truths the magazine constructs about Other cultures are permeated by the hegemonic perspective *National Geographic* is imbued with. The science the magazine creates "is indeed politics pursued by other means, means that are powerful only because they remain radically other" (Latour, 1993: 111). We show that *National Geographic's* scientific point of view is the reflection of the social order at the time of the publication.

***National Geographic's* visual representation of Iranians**

It would not be appropriate for *National Geographic* to represent America's biggest enemy, Iran, in the stereotypical way the media use nowadays: as a despotic, irrational and inferior to the values of the West country. In the August 2008 issue of the magazine, the article "Persia: Ancient Soul of Iran" was published. From the title of the article we understand that it seeks to picture Iran not only as a fundamentalist country but as a country with an ancient civilization that influences the construction of identity of the Iranians nowadays. The large number of images that illustrates this article is like a prop or proof of Iran's ancient Persian identity. Most of them are images of ancient monuments and archeological sites such as Persepolis, Konar Sandal and Choga Zanbil which are evidence of Iran's early civilization. By emphasizing the remnants of the Persian civilization, the discourse and images of the magazine rescue this layer of Iranian history that participates in the constitution of who the Iranians are today. The verbal and visual representations the magazine makes in this article remind us of White's "fictions of factual representation" since the narrative the magazine constructs on Iranian identity refers to actual events and places, but it assimilates these events and

places to a highly personal view (apud. Holland and Huggan, 2000: 10). *National Geographic* tries to convince its readers that the existence of these Persian archeological sites proves the presence of some Persian identity in the making of the contemporary Iranian identity.

The magazine's timeline of Iran's civilizations shows a very dense civilizational evolution from 2500 B.C until the Arab conquest in 641-642 A.D. However, after the Arab conquest, the timeline stops as if the civilization progress was hindered with the outset of the Arab rule. Through the depiction of Persian monuments, the article is interested in constructing the Iranian identity nowadays based on its Persian ancestral heritage. The story and the photographs create a reality of their own that is internal to the discourse and the visual narrative (Bruner, 1990:44). *National Geographic* as a "professional center of truth" (Veyne, 1984:31) constructs Iranian people according to 'truths' that are based on modalities of beliefs and ideology that have their own interests. These beliefs gain validity because they are scientific and rational, related to archeological findings in this case, and allegedly not related to political power (Latour, 1993: 29).

The picture of the schoolgirls in the city of Dezful cooling their feet on a sweltering summer day is taken with a bridge as background which is reported to be one of the "physical reminders of Iran's long history", since its foundations were built to span the Dez River in the third century A.D.



Figure 1: Schoolgirls in the city of Dezful cool their feet on a sweltering summer day. Physical reminders of Iran's long history abound, such as the foundations of the bridge in the distance, built to span the Dez River in the third century A.D.

In this image we perceive the way the different elements that belong to distinctive cultural contexts and historical moments exist side by side in Iran. The cheerful girls with the scarves covering their heads smiling at the camera while refreshing themselves, represent the Muslim layer of the Iranian identity. However, there is not a threatening

aspect in them. They are just children enjoying themselves. At the backdrop, we see the bridge that represents the Persian element in the Iranian identity. The beautiful, massive and solid bridge symbolizes the distant but substantial participation of the Persian culture to the molding of Iranian people. The cars, on the other hand, that circulate in front of the bridge are part of the modern aspect of Iranian identity. The calm waters of the Dez River we can assume represent this supposedly "pacific" coexistence of the three elements. Nevertheless, we are quite certain that identities do not co-exist passively, but as Pareck (2008) assures us "their interaction pluralizes each of them, and discourages their essentialization and reification" (24). It is not pragmatic to essentialize and reify identities since identities are plural, fluid, always interacting and entering in conflict with each other because of the different views they hold (Alcoff, 2003: 7). Each one of our identities is incomplete and has limitations that can be partly overcome by using the insights of the other social identities we hold. People understand these social identities as a way to be linked to certain groups of people and through them they attribute meaning and depth to their lives.

In the article, there are five pictures that portray Iranian people, four of which have archeological sites or art from the Persian civilization as background. There are twelve more photographs of archeological sites and art with no live participant in them. This form of representation of Iranian identity illustrates Pratt's (1992) concept of anti-conquest, a strategy of representation used by Western bourgeois subjects which seeks to secure their innocence in the same moment as they assert their hegemony (7). There is a scientific innocence in the form Iranians are depicted in the article that is articulated by the power relations that override the antagonism between the world's superpower and Iran. In the case of Iran, there is resistance to the hegemonic truths and this turns the country into a threat.

The article starts with a description of Persepolis, the ancient capital of the Persian Empire whose stone walls depict soldiers holding hands and not fighting. The "absence of violent imagery" on the ruins, the portrayal of soldiers that carry weapons but do not draw them and the depiction of "people of different nations gathering peacefully, bearing gifts, draping their hands amiably on one another's shoulders" are reminders to Iranians of their Persian ancestors and the values they held. Persepolis is described as having been a cosmopolitan place in an era of barbarity. Persia is constructed in the article as "a conquering empire" but also as "one of the more glorious and benevolent civilizations of antiquity" and the author Marguerite del Giudice sets out to find "how strongly people might still identify with this part of their history" or "what "Persian" means to Iranians".



Figure 2: "The art of Persepolis was brilliant propaganda," says archaeologist Kim Codella. It played to aspirations: Persian nobles ascending stairs hand in hand to the Tripylon hall may signal fraternity among the empire's elites.

On the back wall of this part of the stone walls of Persepolis there is a procession whose participants are donning simpler garments than the ones that are portrayed in the foreground. They are representatives of subject nations bringing gifts to the king and paying homage to their ruler. It is a gift-bearing delegation that establishes the loyalty between a king and his subjects. In the foreground there are figures of Persian nobility "ascending stairs hand in hand to the Tripylon hall" and they may signal "fraternity among the empire's elites". This image opposes the reality in Iran at the time of publication of the article when Iranian citizens, mainly students, were showing their opposition to abuses of power, not only domestic but also foreign and not only contemporary but also historical.

The publication of this article anticipated the 2009 elections in Iran which were followed by protests against the controversial victory of the Iranian president Ahmadinejad. The loyalty the governed of the Persian Empire used to show their governors is not part of the contemporary Iranian reality. The protests that took place in Iran after the 2009 election were also nicknamed Persian Awakening and exalted the Persian principle of cosmopolitanism and interaction with the foreign element. Iranians having been shunned by the international community and suffering sanctions that have thrown large numbers of the population to poverty are craving for contact with the Other. The article reveals that some officials such as the Iranian vice President Esfandiar Rahim Mashae see "the bond with antiquity as a focus for hope". The article is digging into the souls of Iranians in order to find in them their Persian layer that is more appreciated by the magazine's hegemonic perspective than their Muslim shell. Iranians have been constructed in the western world, as *National Geographic* points out, as people living under the "world's first constitutional theocracy" which imposes "an extreme version of Islam". In an era when Iran is "being shunned by the international community, their culture demonized in Western cinema, and their leaders cast, in an escalating war of words with Washington, D.C., as

menacing would-be terrorists out to build the bomb", *National Geographic* looks for a root of cultural proximity of these people to the West.

The Iranian identity is constructed as part Persian, part Islamic and part Western: "This would be a story about those Iranians who still, at least in part, identify with their Persian roots. Perhaps some millennial spillover runs through the makeup of what is now one of the world's ticking hot spots. Are vestiges of the life-loving Persian nature (wine, love, poetry, song) woven into the fabric of abstinence, prayer, and fatalism often associated with Islam—like a secret computer program running quietly in the background?" The categories created by the magazine disclose its secular mindset. Since the magazine presents itself as a Western instrument of science, it tends to frown upon religions' involvement in state issues. And as Islam is perhaps the only religious tradition that resists Westernization, it is not seen with a positive eye (Jameson, 2000: 67). Parekh (2008) affirms that each person possesses a variety of social identities since we are all members of different ethnic, religious, cultural, occupational, national and other groups. Every social identity has its own way of looking at the world. Therefore, multiple identities mean multiple perspectives which create the possibility of a broader, more nuanced and differentiated view of the world (24). The article strives to expose an Iranian identity whose perspectives would fall nearer to the Western ways of seeing the world.

Marguerite del Giudice constructs Iranians as possessing a historically inherited identity which is authentic and might free them from the influence of Islam. Islam is seen as the cause for their marginalization in the international community and they are portrayed as if they could fight hard to trace the roots of their identity and thus become accepted by growing into the people they used to be 13 centuries ago.



Figure 3: On location at Persepolis, an actress in Islamic dress passes before 2,500-year-old carvings proclaiming the might of a Persian king.

In the opening photograph of the article, an actress in Islamic dress is seen passing before 2,500-year-old carvings proclaiming the might of a Persian king. The woman, in

the foreground, uses the traditional black outfit and scarf that Islam requests. Her exotic characteristics attract the eye of the beholder. She does not look straight at the camera challenging the viewer but diverts the look of her alluring eyes. She is photographed between two male characters one of whom is a guest showing his loyalty to the king. The nobility of the carving can be seen in the poise of the king and the guest and in the respect they seem to show each other. The king is carrying a staff of office symbolizing his authority and a lotus flower which probably symbolizes divine birth. In this case, the science of archeology is used in order to prove the layer of Persian national identity (Said, 2003: 73). The consolidation of this identity has to happen in the ancient site that bears proof of the existence of such culture.

The first characteristic of Iranian identity that is revealed in the article is that of hospitality. Hospitality is part of a system of ritual politeness (*taarof*), an unwritten code for how people should treat each other that covers areas also such as courting, family affairs and political negotiations. In spite of the word having an Arabic root, the idea of ritual politeness is explained as being Persian in origin. Giudice ends up considering this seeming sincerity that involves hiding your true feelings as "artful pretending". It is apparent that the hegemonic view of the magazine highlights this trait of Iranian identity because of its Persian origins. However, the look it casts on it valorizes such values as honesty and straightforwardness that are supposedly Western.

The article traces human settlements in Iran at least 10,000 years ago and reveals that Iran took its name from Aryans that settled there around 1500 B.C. Iran is described as occupying a strategic position where the East meets the West. Its location and its wealth are the reasons why it has been invaded by the Turks, Genghis Khan, the Mongols and finally by Arabian tribesmen. The latter, the article discloses, began a period of Muslim greatness that was distinctly Persian. Persian culture is described as dominant in times of invasions in such degree that it turned conquerors into conquered. The Persians' "capacity to get along with others by assimilating compatible aspects of the invaders' ways without surrendering their own—a cultural elasticity that is at the heart of their Persian identity" is being spoken admirably of in *National Geographic*.

Iran is constructed as the cradle of such principles as freedom and human rights in the sixth century B.C. during the first Persian Empire. It appears to be the world's first religiously and culturally tolerant empire: "Cyrus, reputedly a brave and humble good guy, freed the enslaved Jews of Babylon in 539 B.C., sending them back to Jerusalem to rebuild their temple with money he gave them". By having the magazine highlight this characteristic of tolerance and kindness of the Persian Empire, the reader ends up wondering how the nowadays Iran has become the complete opposite of what it used to be in the eyes of the Western world. Nowadays, Iran is talking about the extinction of the state of Israel.

The tomb of Cyrus the Great comes to exhibit the remnants of the first Persian emperor who was admired as an early champion of human rights and "allowed religious diversity and respected the local customs of those he conquered". The values that permeated Persian culture are highlighted since they are supposed to be similar to the principles the hegemony holds in high esteem and are allegedly the opposite of the values contemporary Iranian society is constituted by. This may be explained by Mignolo's (1995) concept of *cultural relativism* (apud. de Souza, 2008), a strategy used by

hegemonic cultures. *National Geographic* accepts difference as long as it can bring to light values in the history of the Other that are believed to be objective and universal.



Figure 4: Pasargadae: Scaffolding surrounds the tomb of Cyrus the Great (ca 559 to 530 B.C.), the first Persian emperor, while archaeologists strive to restore its roof. Admired as an early champion of human rights, Cyrus allowed religious diversity and respected the local customs of those he conquered.

In figure 4, we see the tomb of Cyrus the Great which has been photographed at dawn in order to represent the beginning of a new period for Iran if the principles of the Persian Emperor are followed. Iran is represented as having to trace back to its history the values of its own ancestral culture in order to be able to construct a better present. The scaffolding which is there because archeologists are striving to restore the roof of the tomb illustrates the need to revitalize the concepts of freedom and human rights that "may not have originated with the classical Greeks but in Iran, as early as the sixth century B.C. under the Achaemenid emperor Cyrus the Great".

The proof that the foundations of such human rights can be found in the Persian period is the Cyrus Cylinder, made of clay which has inscribed on it, in cuneiform, a decree "that has been described as the first charter of human rights". This decree is "a call for religious and ethnic freedom; it banned slavery and oppression of any kind, the taking of property by force or without compensation; and it gave member states the right to subject themselves to Cyrus's crown, or not". Persia is constructed by the magazine as the complete opposite of contemporary Iran that is usually conceived in the West by its last 30 years of Islamic revolution. The Persian Empire, "a kingdom that at its height, under Cyrus's successor, Darius, extended from the Mediterranean to the Indus River" and "comprised more than 23 different peoples who coexisted peacefully under a central government" was "the world's first superpower". The empire included "today's Iraq, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Turkey, Jordan, Cyprus, Syria, Lebanon, Israel, Egypt, and the Caucasus region". A local speaker, Saeed Laylaz, is quoted saying that Iranians have a nostalgia to be a superpower again and "the country's nuclear ambitions are directly related to this desire".



Figure 5: A griffin and a winged goddess, representing a fanciful blend of Persian and Greek imagery from a time when Persia's rule stretched far and wide, accompany breakfast at the opulent Dariush Grand Hotel on the island of Kish.

In this picture we see upscale Iranian men having breakfast at the "opulent Dariush Grand Hotel on the island of Kish". The piece of art hanging on the wall portrays the griffin, a legendary creature with the body of a lion and the head and wings of an eagle. The griffin was supposed to be a very powerful creature because it mixed the lion, the king of the beasts and the eagle, the king of the birds. In ancient times, the griffin was a symbol of divine power but in the Achaemenid Persian Empire the griffin was considered a protector from evil, witchcraft and secret slander. The griffin is supposed to have originated in Greece but it also appears in such sites as Persepolis. The winged goddess must be Nike, the Greek goddess of victory. She is represented pointing to a certain direction. The bull at the top of the pillar probably symbolizes power. Symbolically this piece of art talks about the Iranians' ambition for power.

Another trait the magazine reports Iranians are interested in revealing to the world is that they are not Arabs and that they are not terrorists, as they tell Giudice. Even after the Arab invasion, they turned to the Shiite sect which was different from the Arabs, who are Sunni. The Arabs that conquered Iran "are commonly regarded as having been little more than Bedouin living in tents, with no culture of their own aside from what Iran gave them". This way of picturing Other people as a-cultural was common in the Imperialistic period of travel writing and not unusual in the hegemonic discourse of scientific magazines such as *National Geographic*. However, in spite of the Arab culture being described as inferior to the Persian one, the Arab invasion is depicted as the beginning of the end for Iran's ancient civilization. A woman in the article is heard saying: "Everything went down after they came, and we have never been the same!" And an English teacher named Ali expressed the following: "Before they came, we were a great and civilized power... They burned our books and raped our women, and we couldn't speak Farsi in public for 300 years, or they took out our tongues."

Iranians are represented as having fought back the influence of Arab invasion even after thirteen centuries by reading the works of poets who still use the Farsi language. Many

times the works of such writers are consulted even more than Islam's holy book, the Koran, on matters of love and life it is revealed in the article. Again, the magazine uses the Western conception of the need for the written word and founding books for a culture really to preserve itself. In the Western imagination, oral storytelling would not play such a decisive role in the transmission of cultural and social identity and cultural knowledge as the written book. Oral modes are not considered to bear the same cultural seriousness and prestige as written forms of cultural transmission.

The display of the archeological sites and the demonstration of the importance of works written in Farsi are artifacts that are used by the magazine to revive the Persian strand of the collective cultural memory. Still, they are positivist ways the magazine adopts to construct such complex a texture as cultural identity. As Klapproth (2004) affirms "although Western *philosophical* thinking has transcended the tenets of positivism, the basic premises of the positivist view of the world are still deeply entrenched in Western socio-cultural life and still largely guide educational and academic practices" (51). *Shahnameh*, or *Book of Kings* is an epic history of Iran written by the poet-hero Ferdowsi. He has been given the credit for helping save the Farsi language from extinction. Moreover, the stories of *Shahnameh* are very significant for the way Iranians perceive their identity. Klapproth (2004) believes that "we understand our own existence in this world in terms of the prototypical story structures of our culture" (57). Iranians, as most human beings, undeniably understand their own biographical existence narratively in terms of internalized, culture-specific, and prototypical story structures (ibid.: 58).

Iranians still celebrate cultural touchstones such as the New Year called Nowruz that is a holdover holiday from Zoroastrianism, at one time the state religion of the Persians. The article declares that "by the time the Arabs arrived, bringing what was for them the new idea of worshipping a single God, Persians had been doing it for more than a millennium." The government is told to be trying to diminish the importance or even replace ceremonies inherited by the Persian culture but people react and declare that no one can control what is inside them. The Arab culture and Muslim religion are put in the background. The information the article shares with its readers may bring a slight modification in the western way of perceiving the Iranian identity but we wonder about its capacity to deconstruct the dominant ways of representing Iranians in the last 30 years.

National Geographic relates to a layer of Iranian identity that has passed from a process of marginalization. In order to share with its readers this aspect of Iranian identity, the magazine has to create it in a way that seems coherent and comprehensible to its readers. The article uses an organizational structure whose internal coherence aims at convincing its readership of the truthfulness of its representations. Moreover, the article reveals the economic power of Iran by disclosing that it is "sitting on what Iran claims is an estimated 135 billion barrels of proven conventional oil reserves, the second largest in the world after Saudi Arabia." Iran also holds a strategic position since it controls the Strait of Hormuz, through which much of the world's oil passes every day. "So Iran is in a unique position to threaten the world's oil supply and delivery—or sell its own oil elsewhere than to the West". In this later development of the article, the reader starts having a better understanding of the politico-economic nature of the conflict between Iran and the West. Although the media nowadays and "their spokespersons sometimes

articulate it in civilizational terms, there is no reason to be fooled by their rhetoric" (Parekh, 2008: 163).

The article discloses how the United States has interfered in Iran's public affairs after World War II. In 1953, the CIA together with the British government participated in the overthrowing of Iran's elected and popular prime minister, Mossadegh because he had kicked out the British after the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company was nationalized. Mossadegh was imprisoned and the shah was returned to power and commercial oil rights fell largely to British and U.S. oil companies. This intervention by western elements is thought to have caused the fundamentalism that has characterized Iranian society since then.

The shah is reported as having tried to westernize Iranian society which did not understand western culture. When reactions started taking over, the shah's secret police executed, imprisoned, tortured and exiled who did not comply. Although Iranians welcomed the rule of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini as a cleansing from westernized culture, they came to realize that the clerics were taking over commerce, government administration, the courts and people's private life. The narrative the magazine constructs on contemporary Iran can be explained by Parekh's (2008) statement that "fundamentalism...arises in a society with a deep and pervasive sense of disorientation and degeneration, and consists in using the institutions of the state to reconstitute it on religious ideas" (148). The article presents Iranian society as a spying one, where brother turns in brother. The clerics are depicted as having tried to eliminate any sign of Iran's Persian identity by changing schoolbooks, names of streets and Zoroastrian symbols from their ancient religion. Although the magazine admits that only a tiny percentage of modern Iran's population now follows the faith, it reports that Zoroastrianism was once the state religion of the Sassanid dynasty—and its influence pervades much of the country's history. The spark of Zoroastrianism is still part of the Iranian identity, as the article tries to convince us. Iranians are constructed throughout the article as feeling that the "new" identity that has been imposed on them by the government does not represent them either.

In this picture we see a family celebrating the Zoroastrian holiday of Mehregan that has been celebrated since the first Persian Empire or even earlier. We get to know from the caption that Zoroastrianism has about 30,000 followers. In a country of 74.700.000 inhabitants, Zoroastrianism is definitely a peripheral religion. Its rituals and tradition are still celebrated by the majority of the population, though.



Figure 6: Candles illuminate the face of a Zoroastrian boy during Mehregan, an autumnal festival celebrated from the time of the first Persian Empire or earlier. Zoroastrianism survived the Arab conquest nearly 1,400 years ago and today has some 30,000 followers in Iran.

The innocence in the boy's face contradicts the fundamentalism with which Iranians are usually depicted. The peaceful moment the boy is having and his involvement with the practice of the ancient ritual of Zoroastrianism seem a more welcome tradition than the Islamic one. The fact that it is also carried out at home, in a private place with few participants shows this religion's inner force. Iranians are described as spiritual people who keep with the Persian proverb "Knowledge of self is knowledge of God". Although spiritual, Iranians have adopted modernity and its mind set. If there had not been western interference to their internal affairs they "could have been the New York of the Middle East— of all of Asia, frankly—a center of finance, industry, commerce, culture, and a modern way of thinking" the founder of the online magazine *Persian Mirror* affirms.

Iranians are depicted as "schizophrenic" because of their mixed Persian, Islamic and Western identity. Again the magazine regards with contempt the hybridity and multiplicity of identities which we are all constituted by. We concur with Said (2004) when he admits that what is interesting about cultures and civilizations is not their essence or purity but the combinations they make and the diversity they create by the continued dialogue they establish with other civilizations (48).

It is impressive how the images in this article come to show the monuments of the ancient Persian civilization as a proof of the existence of its essence still in the souls of Iranians. Moreover, the fact that the article does not seek to omit the actions taken by the western world in other countries to secure its own interests gives a more political than religious explanation to the Muslim chunk of Iranian identity. The magazine's claim to truth is based on the narrative it constructs that seeks to represent the consciousness that built these archeological sites and the values they portrayed. The magazine records Iran's past with an eye to the present and, at the same time, uses the past in order to mold the present. By adopting such a stance the magazine stops seeing time as linear but, in this specific case, desires to see it as cyclical. The magazine somehow plays God and wants to rework the clay Iranians are made of. By doing this it

cracks its own master narrative of linear conception of time and progress. Moreover, the magazine's hegemonic outlook does not appreciate their difference but seeks to find the supposed similarities Persian identity used to have to the West. By valorizing the principles of Persian culture, *National Geographic* identifies its hegemonic culture with these principles and implies that these are the values that the West is constructed on. In the end, the construction of the Iranian identity in *National Geographic* reveals more about the West than about Iran itself. The description of the current Iranian identity shows that they are not quite at home in the international community and Iran is portrayed as having been more civilized in the past than in the present.

The reconstitution of Iranian identity, its "*indeterminism* is the mark of the conflictual yet productive space in which the arbitrariness of the sign of cultural signification emerges within the regulated boundaries of social discourse" (Bhabha, 1995: 48). Cultural translation is a complex process of signification (ibid.: 49). The archeological sites represented in the article acquire the function of mimetic act of cultural representation.

National Geographic wishes to slow down the linear Iranian stream of life. It wishes to create a breach, a break that will give a chance to Iranian people to review their identity. Iranians need to renegotiate their identities, resist their Islamic reality and the sorrows it has brought upon them and open a door to salvation by reliving the stories of glory that are enshrined in the monuments that are still standing in the Iranian territory. We see that the magazine constructs its discourse on the principles of culture-sympathy and culture-clash (Bhabha, 1998: 30). Iranians are different from the West because of religious and political reasons but at the same time there is cultural connection because of Iran's Persian past. Versions of historic memory are reconstructed in the magazine in order for the magazine to create a dialectic with the otherwise incomprehensible Other. We should be very careful when applying and imposing our own Western categories on Other people. The stories *National Geographic* constructs are an important factor in the transmission of its own Western culture. While broadening our knowledge on Other cultures, the magazine disseminates its own conceptual patterns of thought. Not only the discursive environment on which the magazine constructs its discourse but also its structural and thematic organization of the stories it tells are culture specific.

Conclusion

Our objective was to describe and analyze the ways and methods the magazine uses in its attempt to create and communicate meaning. Each institution is characterized by specific forms of discourse since institutions are characterized by their specific and typified forms of discourse. Kress understands discourses as "systematically organized sets of statements which give expression to the meanings and values of an institution" (1989: 7). This association of discourses and institutions has far-reaching implications for the organization of human social action. As Klapproth admits "what can be said within the area of concern of a particular institution, and how it can be said, is to a certain extent determined by the discourse that is appropriate within that institution" (40). We see representations as a discursive process and not in the traditional mimetic manner since the word "remains distinct from the world, does not participate in the world, partakes no necessary share in the essential nature of the real" (Garrouette, 1999: 949). Therefore, we call attention to the conflicts inherent in the process of signification and consider it useless to suggest a substitution of the discursive and visual images *National Geographic* makes of the Other (de Souza, 1996: 70).

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